The Perfect Catch

by Margaret Drury Gane

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THE PERFECT CATCH

He was ambitious, prosperous and headed for bigger things. Not one of those mod frivolous bachelors. And he had carefully singled her out for himself

There she was, right on time. Like a signal he might set his watch by. No, he didn't know her yet, but he would manage that, somehow, the way he had planned everything else in his life. He watched her, jogging lightly toward the bus stop, the brown straight hair curving back under an orange cap, shoulder bag flapping behind. She might not be the right one, of course. Several *hadn't* been, for various reasons; hadn't fitted into his plans. But knowing *what* he wanted had always been an accurate gauge for him and planning had been the reasonable and logical strategy.

Even at eighteen, while other kids had stared blankly at their guidance teachers, and sweated, for reasons they couldn't define, toward a letter in something, he had known, not hoped, that he would eventually work for the famous firm whose initials identified them without explanation. Plans, work, accomplishment. The school subjects he had chosen, the part-time jobs had been carefully selected with only that goal in mind. And now, at twenty-six, he was doing exactly what he had set out to do eight years before.

She had reached the bus stop, not even puffing. There, then, was another piece of the puzzle he could fit in place: she seemed prompt, was obviously in good physical condition, not too thin, but compact and firmly muscled, like an athlete with a good appetite. He watched her, over the others waiting for the bus, amusing himself by mentally composing an advertisement:

"Fast-rising young business executive wants a woman with intelligence, able to provide comfort, feminine skills in homemaking and hostess duties, companionship when required. Must be a good listener. The successful candidate will be . . ."

In short, he was looking for a wife. After all, there were certain steps a smart man took if he wanted to get ahead . . . which club was right, how to dress, when to be available in an understated and reliable way. It had taken him just a couple of business lunches to decode the insular, cryptic language that marked one a "JDN man," and quickly he was using "crunch" and "marketplace" and "drift," with all the panache of a ten-year man. Now, having absorbed wisdom, he knew it was time to add a wife to his company assets.

Over the hunched January shoulders he could see her in profile, chin a bit pointed, a thinly curving nose that reminded him pleasantly of aristocracy. Appearance, he was *Continued on page 44*

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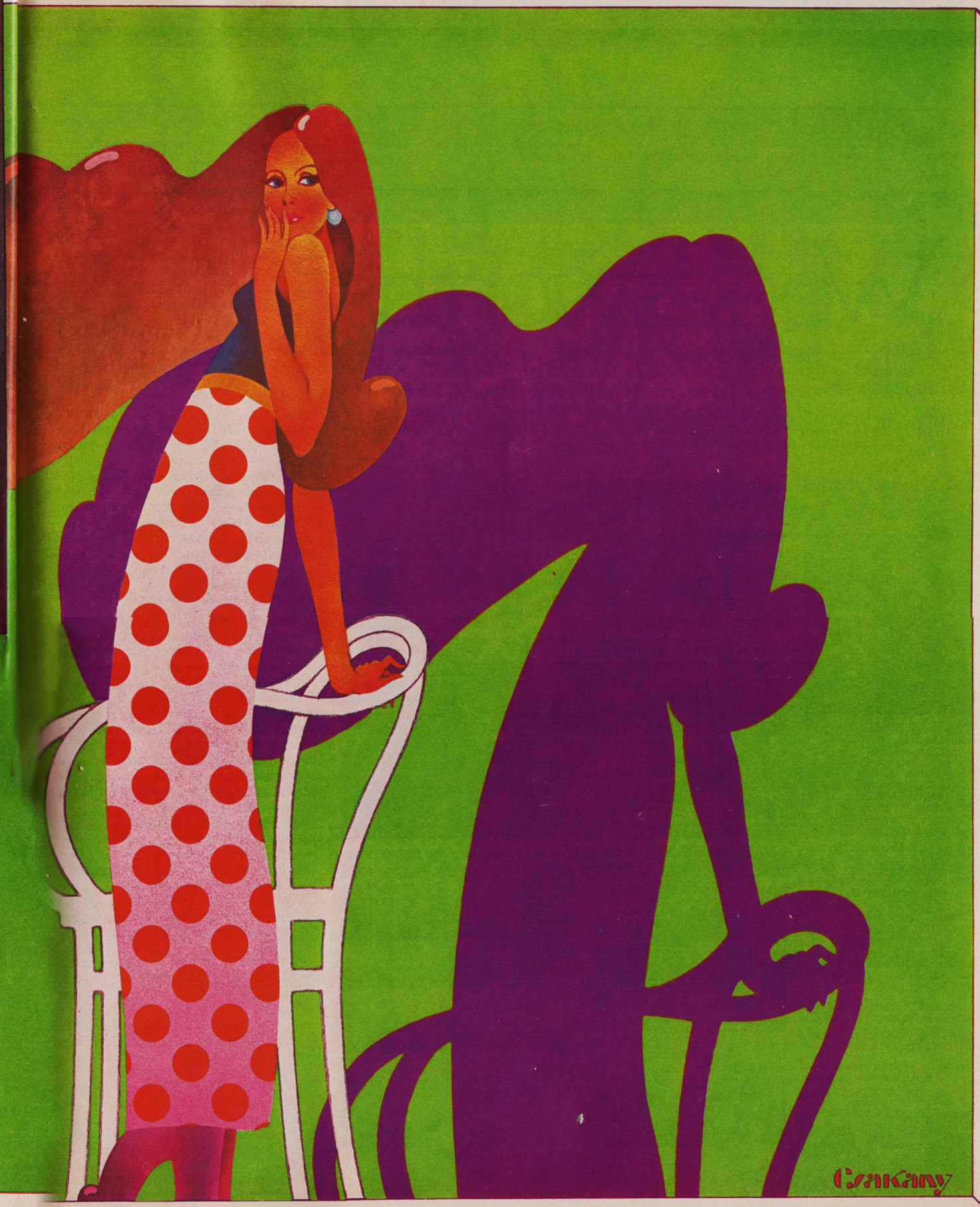
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thinking, was a plus, but not as point-getting as pliability . . . those uncertain hours, last-minute conferences, large parties. The people at the bus stop were shuffling their feet and stamping in the clammy salted mush. Someone said, "Here it comes,!" and the beefy man beside him muttered, "About time." A sort of corporate sigh of relief went up as the bus lurched its way into the curb, sucking them all up in its dry mouth.

She had found a seat, and immediately began to jot something down in the notebook on her lap. He wondered, as he had done other days, at her ability to concentrate in this air hung heavy with rubbery odors, sweaty coats and bagged lunches. It *could* be a plus, but might also mean immunity to more than atmosphere — dog hairs on a chesterfield, or unmade beds, for instance. The bus hissed, suddenly slowing, and he saw the notebook slide off her lap. With swift grace he was beside her, smiling a little stiffly, mopping the book free of sludge drops.

"I believe this is yours?" he said, thinking how smoothly these things went when you were ready for them. "By the way, I'm Simon Tyrrel."

"WELL, AFTER four dates, what is he like? Handsome? Bright? Ambitious? Interested? Tell me something." Grace Smith was pouring fat from the morning bacon into an empty soup can, while her roommate did a waist exercise with one leg stretched tautly on the edge of the kitchen sink.

"You have no idea how this hurts," said Pat Giles.

"Yes, I have. That's why I don't do it."

"He's very polite. He's about an inch taller than I am, brown-haired . . ." she waved a hand vaguely in the air, dismissing his looks because she hadn't noticed them to any great degree. "Just one strip of bacon for me, okay? No toast, thanks. There's something about him, though, that's awfully attractive. His confidence, maybe. An air of authority . . . And he's an accountant with JDN."

"Sense of humor?" Grace asked, recalling her encounter with that company some time ago. All those intense men with attaché cases, hair carved into identical cuts . . .

"Yes, sort of. Not particularly zany, though. His jokes always seem to have something to do with the gross national product." Pat eased her leg slowly down, moaning softly.

Grace Smith and Patricia Giles had been sharing their three rooms and a bathroom for just a little over two months. Their apartment was one of several in an ancient stone-and-brick house that had been saved from certain destruction, as many things are, by hastily adapting itself to the new world around it. While it still presented gingerbread gentility outside, with tiny carved balconies and a vast encircling porch, the changes inside blew the air of the seventies through the old halls. It had been "the Collier place," at one time, but all the gilt-edged gallery of Colliers, staring down from the stucco walls, had long been stored away, and new ecology posters, folk art and hangings of macrame indicated that the place had new owners.

"Hey, you've just got twenty minutes to catch the bus," Grace called, and sat down at the kitchen table. She picked up the crisp bacon, nibbling at it absently. It was working out well, with Pat. Not like the last girl, who had turned the place into a zoo, burning incense and dinners with equal unconcern, hanging her pantyhose over cereal boxes.

"Ready for coffee?" Pat poured two cups. "He's asked me out tonight."

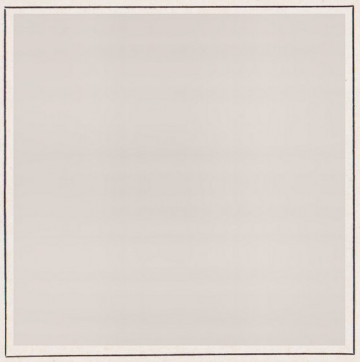
"Do you like him?"

"Well, he makes the bus ride shorter, of course. There *is* something about him, a kind of 'zonk.' Would you say that was physical attraction? I suppose it is. But I honestly can't tell you whether or not I like him. Haven't known him long enough."

Grace nodded in agreement. "Relationships are usually better when they build *up* from something . . ."

"Like yours and Derek's?"

"Exactly. We've seen each other at our worst, and we're still comfortable together. Remember when I had the flu, and he was in here cooking and changing sheets?" Grace stood up to clear the table. "I'm lucky, really. I've gone out



with so many men that I've come to know certain symptoms. There's the Chrome Syndrome. That's when a man is forever looking at himself in something shiny . . . fenders, store windows, the toaster. Out comes the comb, poof goes the conversation. Horizontal Harrys, with their moist eyes and one-track minds. Muscle-Flexers, who play Tarzan and take to the trees if you want to talk politics. The one thing they have in common is self-preoccupation!"

"Well, I haven't had that much experience, but I don't think Simon fits any of those categories. Hey, I've got to go. It's quarter to." She pulled the orange cap on, snatched up her purse and notebook, calling back over her shoulder: "His name's Simon Tyrrel. He pronounces it 'Tyr-REL.' Elegant, eh?"

"Yes, elegant," Grace said to the closing door. She wondered why she had the urge to play den mother to this girl who was only a few years younger. Grace knew only a little of Pat's past life, that she had been the eldest child of four, the one who became her mother's right hand around the house. She had played house, in effect, from the age of twelve. But how naïve she seemed in her social relationships with men had become abundantly clear to Grace during conversations they had had in the past few weeks.

Men were either lofty heads-of-homes, bringing presents, like Daddy, for work well done, or endearingly young brothers who couldn't cope and must be taken care of. Grace felt that nothing could have been better for this loving young woman than to move out, as she had done, and to concentrate, probably for the first time in her life, on her own needs.

"Simon Tyrrel," Grace said to her reflection in the hall mirror. "Why couldn't someone give *me* an interesting name like that?"

She locked up carefully before she left for her job at MacComber's department store. Grace Smith, she was thinking to herself. Grace Smith! Imagine a decorator with a name like that?

BY THE TIME February arrived, drawn and white from a winter sun too feeble to get above the buildings, Grace sensed changes in Pat. For a time, she put it down to the drab time of year, her own overworked imagination. The fact that she had never met Simon, that he had never been to their apartment only heightened her misgivings. Pat didn't jog to the bus stop now, because Simon had his new car, and he would park outside for her in the morning. "I've only seen the top of his head!" Grace had said to Pat one day. "I mean, how can I know anything about him from *that* bird's-eye view?"

Pat would laugh, as though it had been meant as a joke, and go on talking about Simon. Over dishes, after supper, Grace would have to build her own picture of him from Pat's conversations.

"He's great to shop with," Pat would confide in that artless voice, elbow deep in Simon, and wading in further by the minute. "He suggested the yellow sweater, you know? He *notices* me, Grace . . ."

"Does he know about your work? How good you are at it? Has he noticed that?"

"Of course," Pat would say, pushing past this impatiently, wanting to immerse herself again. "But no one's ever done little things for me before. I did them, I guess. And he makes me feel important . . ."

"You'd be important anyway!" But it was useless. Pat would turn her happy kind eyes toward her, scarcely noticing the interruption or the compliment.

Grace decided to take her frustration and her sewing downstairs to Derek's apartment, after a phone call to see if he minded. She found him stretched out on the floor over a book.

"Do y'know," he said softly, "there's a hell of a lag between what we know would be better for kids in school, and what we *do*."

"Hear! Hear!" Grace thumped his desk top like a parliamentarian and sank into a chair. "Is Bob out?" she asked.

"Getting a stew together in the kitchen." Derek jerked a thumb toward the closed door, and snapped his book shut.

"How about a drink, lovely Grace?"

"What are you having?" She peered into his glass.

"Goat's milk and vodka . . . The Curdle."

"Too gloppy. Just surprise me." Grace took a skirt from her bag and began to pick nearsightedly at the clear fishline of plastic that passed for thread in the hem. "I'm replacing this with linen," she explained, taking the glass he offered. She grinned up at him. "As a man hung up on 'organic' everything, that should please you." He nodded, and sat down on the floor, in his plain blue shirt and jeans, looking, she thought, a little like a guru.

"Isn't Pat working out?" he asked.

"I couldn't get a better roommate."

Derek reached for a banana and began to peel it with deliberate care, as though he were performing plastic surgery. "Something's wrong."

"That's what bothers me. I think the something may be Simon."

Derek's eyes widened slightly, but he said nothing.

"I think Pat's reason may be suffering temporary arrest. Tell me, how else could someone as bright as she turn parrot in a few weeks? 'Simon this, Simon that.' He shops for her. I get Simon served with cereal in the morning, and there he is again wading around in the salad at night."

"Scrape him off the plate and into the garbage, then!"

"Doesn't work. I've tried to bend the conversation in other directions, but back he bounces. In a way, it's a little frightening, a sort of hypnosis thing."

"Look Grace, if it's a crush, she'll get over it better without your help, she's old enough to make her own mistakes. You're not her mother, and worrying wouldn't help if you were. Why don't you let her find out for herself?"

"I'll try. Now, before I go, give me an idea for MacComber's Valentine windows . . . anything but a window full of hearts."

"Brains," Derek answered, after some thought. "A window full of brains. That's where we feel, isn't it? I'll trade you that bit of intelligence for some ideas on how to control a bus full of kids going to the museum tomorrow."

When Grace went back upstairs at eleven, she found a note propped up against a jar on the kitchen table:

"May be a little late, but don't worry. Simon had an evening meeting before we left. Pat."

Grace got into bed, putting aside her natural instinct to worry over these two people she hardly knew. It's a bum habit, she told herself, picking at people's lives, trying to arrange them like the windows I do, one thing here, another there, until they fit *my* idea of right. She heard the old house sighing around her, as if it had waited until night to let its floorboards snap back at the heavy footsteps endured all day. A radiator clanked, that startling steel-drum sound that made her recall with almost rushing warmth her grandmother, who could not sleep at night, and prowled the kitchen trying not to disturb others. She had worried about *that*, too.

"HELLO? COULD I speak to Miss Smith, please?" Pat was calling from the law office of Purdy, Purdy and Trees on her lunch hour.

"Grace Stuyvesant-Smith here."

"Hey, Grace that's a good one."

"Just trying it on for today."

"Look, I know you're busy and so am I. Joan's trying the Keemun case today and I'm eating at the desk. I'd like to ask Simon to the apartment for dinner Thursday . . . my night to cook, remember? . . . and I'd like you and Derek to meet him. Do you think Derek would come?"

"Naturally I'll have to ask him, but I'm pretty sure he'll be as —" Grace checked herself hastily, nearly saying curious — "happy as I will to meet Simon."

Grace tried very hard that night, baking a cake with crème-de-menthe icing, and managing to borrow a tall slightly used green candle from one of the display rooms for the centre of the table. And when Simon arrived at eight o'clock, she offered to show him the apartment while Pat basted the pork birds and Derek made drinks.

"Nice. Nice." Simon murmured, his vivid blue eyes making a kind of military sweep over the walls.

"I did most of the decorating before Pat lived here, so you can't blame her," Grace said pushing open the door into the blatantly scarlet bedroom that was her joy. Simon glanced in, then swiftly withdrew his head, as though he had glimpsed an early and private hell.

"I'm sorry. It's a color that makes me claustrophobic. I'm sure it's very . . . warm."

"No, don't apologize! Navy blue has the same effect on me. I just happen to love red. It's supposed to heighten the appetite, you know; that's why it's used frequently in dining rooms. And bedrooms, too, I guess." Grace laughed, but Simon didn't, and Derek pushed through the swinging door from the kitchen rump first, carrying a tray of whisky sours.

"An inch of fuzz," he declared triumphantly, noticing as he spoke that it sounded like the beginning of a proverb. "Pat's knocking her's back in the kitchen," he explained comfortably, "so say a prayer for the gravy."

They each took a glass and sat down with weather murmurings and an elaborate arranging of legs, the body language of formality struggling to be at ease.

"So, Simon, you're an accountant," Derek said enthusiastically, hoping to loosen the atmosphere. It occurred to him, however, that he might have blundered into a conversational one-way street. But Simon liked the question and began a discourse on his work, his office, and his hopes with the enthusiasm of someone applying for a job. It gave Grace time really to look at him. He was good-looking, in an ironed sort of way, with a full low voice and a stronger face than she had expected.

HE HAD COME directly from the office, fully suited, including a vest, everything in deep navy . . . claustrophobic navy, Grace had called it. Only his tie flashed bravely forth, like a knight's colors, confirming his loyalty to Business. He had not removed his jacket, which gave him a faintly temporary air, as if he had dropped in only to return something.

"I'm fortunate," Simon was saying, "my work is my hobby, too." Derek was fingering the recorder sticking out of his shirt pocket. "I can wake up at exactly the same time each morning, without an alarm clock, and since I don't need the bus anymore, time my arrival at JDN to within five minutes." Simon extended a pack of cigarettes toward Derek.

"What's your line, Paulson?"

"No thanks, I don't smoke . . . and just call me Derek, okay? My job? Well, it's changed a couple of times. I started out in the straight world a few years back. Water coolers, time clocks, market surveys, the whole bit. It was a plant where they made string, twine, that sort of thing. Well, anyway, I sat in on a conference one afternoon, with a water glass, an ashtray, and an unused notebook, listening to all this cr. . . stuff about string. 'Where was it going? How could we beat plastic? Could we get the public string-conscious?' "

"I have a few ideas," Simon interjected, becoming interested.

"Well, I *didn't*, you see. That's just the point. I went back to school for more credits, and I'm teaching at present. Little ones, around seven and eight years old."

"Seven?" Simon looked puzzled. "You mean public school, they use *men* in early grades?"

Pat's head appeared around the partition. "It's ready, if you are."

Halfway through the main course, Simon was pursuing the same subject and his dinner with equal vigor, talking skillfully around the broccoli tongued into one cheek while he questioned Derek. Women, he insisted, were traditionally better with small children, were they not? And surely

high school teaching would provide the greater challenge, more status?

"Misconceptions," Derek replied. "Let's put to rest the idea that the higher you teach in the system, the better you are. I agree that subject is important, and skill, too. But, damn it, nobody can hack it in this job, if he or she doesn't *like* children, whether it's in nursery or high school." Derek smiled at Grace, who had heard him say these things often before.

Pat offered Simon the rolls. "I agree. Some men are naturally gifted with little children, some . . ." but Simon was not listening, and instead, deposited a startling eighteenth-century kiss on the back of her hand. "Delicious dinner, darling, delicious . . ." and turned back to Derek.

"I make my living at mathematics," Simon continued seriously, biting into the roll. "I love it. Yet my first teacher would be called a child batterer by today's standards. I'm sure she couldn't have cared less about us. But the point is, I *learned* mathematics. I wasn't supposed to like her."

Derek shook his head. "A number-rammer. Of course really bright kids seem to be able to learn no matter how they're treated! It's the other ninety-five percent who concern me, the ones who freeze up or die of boredom in that atmosphere."

"I suppose you're advocating more love?" Simon suggested, with a touch of disdain.

"I can't see what's so suspect about enjoying a learning experience," Pat declared, though she realized Simon had directed the question to Derek. Grace's candle was dripping indifferently on the salad, but no one seemed to notice. "I'm sorry, Pat," Simon turned deferentially, leaning a little forward as if he were hard of hearing, "What did you say?"

"I simply wondered what was wrong with enjoying a class."

"Oh. Well, nothing, of course. Especially if they're all girls." He leaned back, laughing gently, dabbing at his mouth with the napkin. "Maybe we're getting too serious for the ladies. We have a sort of rule at the office: when women are our guests, no religion, no politics, no shop talk." This compliment dispensed, Simon draped an arm comfortably around Pat's shoulders. "Now, what fabulous delicacy have you concocted for dessert?"

"I'll get it," Derek said, glancing across the table at Grace, whose eyes mirrored his own disbelief. "I hope you like hemlock icing, though."

"Another organic reference?" Simon asked happily, missing the point. There was a palpable and uneasy silence for a moment.

"More salad, Simon?" Grace asked.

"Just a little. Thank you." Grace saw the candle then, with its little landslide of green hardening on a lettuce leaf. It was small revenge she knew, but she served it to Simon with a flourish. Serves him right. Let him eat wax.

AFTER THAT EVENING, Simon seemed less attractive as a subject of conversation to Grace and Derek. Now too well-armed with knowledge, they were finding it increasingly difficult to be objective.

"I hate it, you know, all this pretending," Grace told Derek as he helped her with the supermarket shopping.

"I hadn't noticed that Pat talks much about him lately."

"Now you mention it, she doesn't. I think that worries me more. How can I influence her when I don't know what's going on? Although I did ask her last night."

"You're not pumping again?"

"Of course not. I just don't like events getting ahead of me. His promotion came through, she's had dinner with his parents, he wants two children and no pets . . ."

"Well, you can hardly say he's full of surprises after that dinner. He didn't even help me with the dishes," Derek said mildly.

Remembering that evening, Grace threw a cake mix into the basket vehemently. "What on earth am I going to say if she decides to marry him?"

"Good luck would be apt."

"You think this is funny!"

"No, I don't, Grace. But do you really think Pat would settle for that treatment for the rest of her life, tugging at her forelock and bowing and scraping every time she wants something? You've forgotten that she's tasted a little freedom. I'll bet you an organically grown turnip that she knows exactly what she's doing."

With a growing self-discipline that pleased her, Grace refrained from asking Pat any more questions about Simon. And when she asked her, one wet windy Saturday, if she might have the apartment privately to speak to Simon that night, Grace agreed with nonchalant cheerfulness. But she was sure now that he had asked her to marry him.

It will be June, Grace thought miserably after Pat had left. It would be like Simon to pick June. A long white gown, too, and roses all over the place, triggering her allergy. And she supposed she would have to stand there, supportive and smiling, while Pat chanted the "obey" that Simon would surely have put back into her vows.

THEY HAD THE apartment to themselves, and Simon sat next to Pat, rubbing absently at the empty space on her third finger. "I know of an apartment, quite nice, fairly close to my office."

"Then it can't be close to mine," Pat said. Simon kissed her cheek. "Well, we can't have it both ways. It will be fine for entertaining too. Later, there'll be a house."

"Simon . . . do you remember my notebook?"

"There may be a few moves at first, you understand that. Just part of the job. Your what?"

"My notebook. The one I write in every day."

"Oh, of course. Do you still write in it? That's the thing I picked up on the bus that first day." He thought she must be feeling sentimental, and obligingly slid an arm around her waist, pulling her gently to him. "It introduced us."

"It's right here." Pat edged away, and to his surprise, produced it from the end table.

"Oh. Fine. It will do for something old at the ceremony."

"There isn't going to be a ceremony, Simon."

He gave a sigh of exasperation. "Look, am I missing the rules somewhere? I don't understand you."

"We need to talk."

"I wanted to make love," looking injured.

"Listen, just *listen* to me for once. Here's an entry last November 17th, before I met you. 'Found a precedent for Joan, 1925, Kenner versus Jensen." She flipped a couple of pages. "And this: 'December 1st. Argued the Walton case half the night with Frank Purdy. Woke up with a headache because I forgot to eat . . .'"

"What's the point to all this?"

"You'll see. The entries become fewer after January, after I met you. And they're very different."

She began to read again. " 'Simon says his promotion is a sure thing . . . he has his new car, and he says he'll pick me up at the door from now on . . . Simon likes yellow on me . . . I liked the play tonight but Simon said he's sick of the liberal point of view.' " She closed the book and turned to him. "Can't you hear it? Simon says, over and over again, and *that's* just January. If we were married, I'm afraid in a few months I'd be standing with my hands on my hips till you said I could move."

"That's ridiculous. There has to be some other reason. I'm too conservative for you, that might be it." He lit a cigarette quickly. "I just took it for granted that you wanted marriage, too."

"You took too much for granted. But you wouldn't be the first man to interpret kindness as a total commitment. Marriage was never on my mind . . . you just assumed, and took charge. I even liked your conservatism, in a way, and the way you could become lost in your work. I've felt the same way myself. It's just . . ." She looked away from the confusion in his eyes.

"Just what?"

"I think the night we had dinner here ruined it. I suddenly realized where I stood in your estimation . . . somewhere behind a buffet table, false eyelashes fluttering, helping people I couldn't like to shrimp and runny chicken pie. It would never work out, Simon. We'd end up loathing each other."

Simon stared at her, his hands hanging slackly between his knees. He could think of nothing to say to her now, because she was, truly, a stranger, as much a stranger as she had been the first day on the bus.

Sensing his discomfort, Pat tried to make him laugh. "Look, I guess you wouldn't settle for friendship? I could learn to run a computer, and we could go over the stock market pages together once in a while . . ." But Simon's sense of humor never included himself. He was suddenly remote, composing himself. It was one of his strengths, and she admired it, this ability to pull back and regroup. Something speculative came over his face, an expression Pat had seen in court when a lawyer was ahead of the argument. She need not have worried about him, for she could see that he was already planning alternatives.

"HI! JUST ME." Grace had let herself in and walked through to the kitchen, where Pat was standing in her robe, sipping coffee.

"Welcome, Grace Ledbetter-Smith," Pat grinned at her. "Thought you might like to try that on for a couple of days."

"What's in a name?" Grace said lightly, craning around the partition to see if they were alone. "Simon's gone?"

"An hour ago, and probably forever."

"You said no?"

"Yes."

Grace concealed her relief badly, slopping coffee into a cup with abandon. "Do you mind if I say I'm delighted?"

"Not now, now that I've settled it myself. But there *was* a point, a few weeks back, when I might just have married him, if you or Derek had said one word against him. To prove my independence, I suppose."

"Just like we were parents!"

"You'll have to stop mothering me, Grace. Well, I don't know about you, but I am beat. I'll see you in the morning."

Grace waited until her bedroom door was closed, then reached under the shelf for a package. In it lay an organically grown turnip, unwaxed, firm, just the way Derek liked it.

SIMON ENTERED the elevator at JDN the following Monday morning, wearing a new brown suit, nipped in slightly at the waist, a fresh white shirt and green striped tie. He poked the button with authority, humming a little to himself. Elevators here *had* to work, you could always poke nine and get nine.

"Good morning," he said briskly to his secretary as he swept through his office. He had not looked at her, and was quite surprised when he heard her speak.

"I don't believe we've met."

"Where's Miss Herald?" People, he might have added, were always switching things around. Chairs, pictures, secretaries . . .

"She left last week. I'm your new girl Friday." She displayed perfect teeth in a wide smile. "This is my first morning, so you'll have to forgive my nervousness. But I'm a fast learner, if you're patient." Once again, she poured a molten smile over him, shifting slightly in her chair. Her dictation book slid off her lap, clapping softly to the floor. Simon took two swift steps forward, bent neatly and with infinite grace retrieved it. "And your name?" he asked gently.

"Donna. Donna Downey."

"Well, Donna! Miss Downey! Welcome aboard JDN. By the way, I'm Simon Tyrrel . . ." END